ARTICLE APPEARED ON PAGE 1
CHRISTIAN SCIENCE MONITOR
25 June 1985

Shiite leaders: far from united

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Special to The Christian Science Monitor

One is a lawyer, another a former chemistry teacher. A third is a Shiite priest, and a fourth is a reformed hijacker who recently received his bachelor's degree in political science.

The leaders of the various Shiite Muslim movements in Lebanon are as diverse as their memberships. Their different platforms and goals reflect the fact the Shiites are far from a single, united force in Lebanon.

At stake in the negotiations in Beirut is not just the future of the 40 Americans, who were taken hostage when their TWA jet was hijacked on June 14. Also at stake is the outcome of the heated contest that began in 1982 for leadership of Lebanon's largest sect.

The outcome of the hostage drama could have a major impact on which side — the moderate Shiites or the militants — ultimately emerges as the most influential.

Shiite Amal militia leader Nabih Berri is in the spotlight as the chief Shiite negotiator with the United States. But his prominence by no means guarantees his future.

Mr. Berri's career is full of contradictions: a lawyer turned militia chief, this Lebanese Cabinet minister holds a green card that eventually will allow him to become a US citizen.

Berri rose from comparative obscurity to take over leadership of Amal in 1980. However, his willingness to go along with moderate solutions for Lebanon's domestic political crisis has twice almost cost him the leadership.

Berri symbolizes the first generation of Shiite leaders, those who remember the days of coexistence among Lebanon's 17 recognized sects before the outbreak of civil war in 1975. The challenge has come from the second generation, which has been embittered and radicalized by a decade of strife.

"I am afraid that every moderate will be replaced by another extremist," Berri admitted in late 1983. A close colleague added, "The mullahs [Muslim clergymen] are close, very close to taking over the Shiite movement."

The growing militancy of Lebanon's Shiites has recently forced Berri to take a harder stance, at least in public.

The pressure on Berri is partially reflected in his relations with Iran, where he is unwelcome. Dozens of young Lebanese militants, including fighters from his own movement, have been trained in Iranian camps, and ultimately look to Tehran for religious and political guidance.

Among those trained in Iran is Hamza akl Hamieh, who commands Amal's military wing and appears to be playing a major role in overseeing the security and welfare of the American hostages.

Hamza, as he is known in Beirut, himself hijacked six planes between 1979 and 1982 — all Libyan or Arab planes bound for Libya. His demand in each case was for information about Imam Musa Sadr, the founder of Amal, who disappeared during a visit to Libya in 1978. Each ended peacefully, and Hamza has since given up hijacking.

Appointed to the top Amal military post in 1984, Hamza represents the second generation of Shiites who are more suspicious of Western intentions in the Middle East.

Hamza led the rescue effort last year of Frank Regier, an American University of Beirut professor, and the first American kidnapped in Lebanon who had been held 66 days by more militant Shiites. Yet he also engaged in clashes with the US Marines in 1984, making a clear distinction between the plight of a lone American civilian and a perceived challenge from the military wing of the US government.

The second generation sees little hope in negotiated settlements of Lebanon's power struggle. "I see the fate of my people determined by blood," Hamza says.

While Berri is the man of the moment, Sheikh Muhammad Hussein Fadlallah may be the man of the future. His emergence as a major figure reflects the rise of the Shiite clergy throughout the Middle East since the 1979 Iranian revolution.

The cleric, who specializes in Islamic law, became one of the most feared men in the region after the 1983 bombing of the US and French military compounds. Christian rivals charged that he had blessed the two suicide drivers. Sheikh Fadlallah has repeatedly denied the claim, adding that suicide bombings — as well as hijackings and kidnappings — are "un-Islamic."

But he also said of violence: "Every person needs to defend himself. If a man needs to use violent ways, he must use it." He has also denied reports that he is the leader of the extremist Shiite group Hizbullah (Party of God), but acknowledges that he travels regularly to Iran and knows Ayotallah Khomeini. The sheikh was the apparent target of a bombing in March that killed 80 people. The attack was reportedly carried out by a group that has links with a Lebanese team being trained in counterterrorism by the US Central Intelligence Agency.

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Fadlallah's specific ties are less important than his broad impact on Shiites throughout the Middle East, mainly through his book, "Islam and the Logic of Force." One prominent Iraqi Shiite said of him: "He is like Khomeini was in 1978. He has an enormous following but no official organization."

Hussein Musavi, leader of another radical group called Islamic Amal, is among the few in Lebanon to publicly boast of his support for terrorism and the use of suicide commandos. "This path is the path of blood," Musavi says. "For us death is easier than smoking a cigarette if it comes while fighting for the cause of God and while defending the oppressed."

Musavi, a former chemistry teacher who also reportedly received training in Iran, is another member of the second generation, a more radical counterpart to Hamza. He also typifies the leadership of a host of small groups and cells that advocate violence both to rid the region of Western influence and to bring Islamic rule to Lebanon.

Based in Lebanon's eastern Bekaa Valley since 1982, Musavi often travels to Damascus for meetings with Syrians and Iranian diplomats based there. As with many of the Shiite cells, his group's impact is disproportionate to its size.

It is the challenge from Fadlallah, Musavi, and the militant groups that Berri now faces in his current negotiations. The stakes are high for the Shiite leadership as well as the US.

The writer is a former Monitor correspondent based in Beirut. Her book on Shiites, called "Sacred Rage," will be published soon.